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SUBJECT: VPOTUS MEETING WITH IRAQI PRESIDENT TALABANI

Classified By: Ambassador Chris Hill for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: President Talabani told VP Biden that Iraqi leaders understand the need for a transparent solution to the political problem created by the attempt to disqualify some parliamentary election candidates because of alleged Ba'athist ties. He claimed the main Sunni parties and politicians had not been affected by the effort and was confident that Sunnis would not/not boycott the elections. On government formation, senior political leaders had agreed to meet before the elections to discuss nominees for president, prime minister and speaker of the parliament, potentially speeding the process of assembling a governing coalition. He was optimistic that government formation would occur relatively quickly. Talabani called for greater U.S. investment in Iraq as part of the effort to expand non-military cooperation as U.S. forces draw down. He welcomed the news that the USG would appeal the judicial decision in the case of Blackwater contractors involved in the September 2007 shootings in Baghdad. The Vice President stressed that Iraq remains a priority for the U.S., and that the U.S. seeks a long-term security arrangement and strategic cooperation with Iraq. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (U) U.S. participants: Vice President Joseph Biden; Ambassador Chris Hill; Commanding General (CG) Ray Odierno; Assistant Secretary of State Jeffrey Feltman, Deputy Assistant Secretary of Defense Colin Kahl; Tony Blinken (OVP); Herro Mustafa (OVP); Puneet Talwar and Peter Vrooman (NSC), Emma Sky (USF-I), Poloff (notetaker). Iraqi participants: President Jalal Talabani; Minister of Water Resources Abdul Latif Rashid, Chief of Staff Nizar Saeed, Senior Advisor Fakhri Karim, Chief of Presidency Diwan Nasir al-'Ani; Advisor Shireen Omer.

TRANSPARENT SOLUTION TO DE-BA'ATHIFICATION PROBLEM NEEDED

¶3. (C) During a January 23 meeting with President Jalal Talabani, Vice President Biden dismissed claims that he had visited Baghdad to broker a solution to the crisis occasioned by an effort to disqualify some parliamentary election candidates because of alleged Ba'athist ties. The VP said it was clear Iraq's senior leadership understood that the de-Ba'athification issue could potentially undermine the legitimacy of the elections, and that a solution - to be formulated by Iraqis - was urgently needed. Expressing confidence that such a solution would be found, the VP said it must appear to be a transparent remedy and one consistent with Article 7 of Iraq's constitution. The Vice President reiterated that the U.S. has no intention of interfering, or making a case for the Ba'ath Party. The Vice President noted that there appears to be a misperception in the United States that there was a plot to ban strike all Arab Sunnis from the ballot, and urged Iraqis to address the perception problem.

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TALABANI "SURE" SUNNIS WILL PARTICIPATE

¶ 14. (C) Talabani expressed unhappiness with "propaganda" alleging that Sunnis were being disproportionately targeted, and claimed that the main Sunni parties and politicians had not been affected. The only recognizable Sunni politicians on the list of 500-odd candidates recommended for disqualification were Saleh al-Mutlaq (Iraqi National Dialogue Front and member of the Iraqqiya Coalition) and Dhafer al-Ani (Tawafuq Party). Talabani claimed there were more Shi'a than Sunnis on the list and noted that Kurds and Turkomans were included as well. It was important to legitimize the process by determining which entity had the authority to decide whether candidates could be disqualified.

Striking a conspiratorial note, Talabani said Iraq's neighbors were unhappy with the development of democracy on their borders. Accordingly, Iraq could not "deform" the image of its new democracy by letting the de-Ba'athification issue fester.

¶ 15. (C) Talabani said he had asked Council of Representatives (COR) Speaker al-Samarra'ie to clarify the status of the Accountability and Justice Committee, and had called for meetings that evening and the following morning with the PM, Speaker and Vice Presidents to discuss the way forward. Those on the list of 500 recommended for disqualification had 30 days in which to appeal; the courts then had 60 days to render a decision. The resulting 90-day timeline would extend beyond March 7, potentially allowing a final decision on disqualifications to be deferred until after the elections. Dismissing claims that the Sunni Arab community might boycott the election over the de-Ba'athification effort, Talabani said he was "sure" Sunnis would participate as they did not want to repeat the mistake they made in 2005.

TRANSPARENT ELECTIONS AND QUICK GOVERNMENT FORMATION

¶ 16. (C) The VP underscored the importance of fair, transparent and participatory elections, and of a timely government formation process. Talabani agreed, saying it was important that all Iraqis participate in the elections to demonstrate the strength and inclusiveness of Iraq's democracy. He expressed confidence that formation of the new government would occur relatively quickly, and said he expected that the newly-elected executive and legislative branches would be more effective than the current ones. Talabani shared that he and other senior leaders had agreed to call a meeting of major coalition leaders before elections to discuss nominees for the critical positions of president, prime minister and speaker of the parliament. The goal was to begin negotiations to expedite the process of government formation. A "national front" comprising the major political coalitions had also been proposed. The VP said he was reassured that senior Iraqi leaders understood the importance of prompt government formation, which would mitigate potential confusion and security threats.

ELECTIONS SECURITY

¶ 17. (C) CG Odierno stressed that the period of government formation would be a time of vulnerability for the Government of Iraq; some elements would seek to exploit the transition to destabilize the country. It was thus important to understand the protocols for sustaining security during the transition to a new government. The difference between previous elections and this one, the CG noted, is that U.S. forces previously controlled security. Now they operate under the Security Agreement, creating a new dynamic. While the United States was prepared to help in any way it could, the CG flatly said he was "very worried" about security in the transition period.

NEW GOVERNMENT TO TACKLE TOUGH ISSUES

¶ 18. (C) The VP stressed that with a new government, difficult

issues such as disputed internal boundaries, Kuwait and Iran could be addressed. Regarding Chapter VII sanctions, the Vice President informed Talabani that NEA A/S Feltman would remain in Baghdad to launch a diplomatic Joint Coordinating Committee to begin work aimed at lifting these measures. Minister of Water Resources Rashid argued that implementation of these sanctions had been "unfair".

IRAQ REMAINS A PRIORITY FOR THE U.S.

¶9. (C) Noting that he had visited Iraq four times during the past year, the VP said a key message for his visit was that Iraq remains a premier concern and priority for the United States. As the U.S. military meets conditions for its drawdown, the United States seeks to increase its commercial, economic, cultural and investment activities in Iraq. The United States is similarly committed to a long-term partnership and security arrangement with Iraq, and seeks advice on how it can be helpful during the last stages of Iraq's transition to being a fully sovereign, democratic state. The VP said he was impressed by the way Iraq had negotiated a succession of difficult political issues, as if the country was a mature democracy. Talabani responded that he was heartened by the VP's appreciation of the Iraqi example.

¶10. (C) Responding to the VP's description of enhanced diplomatic and other non-military engagement, Talabani emphasized the need for greater U.S. investment. The VP noted that continued political progress and the mitigation of deep-seated differences would prompt strong U.S. commercial interest in Iraq. Citing the successful results of Iraq's recently-concluded second oil bid round, the VP remarked that Iraq's oil production in 10 years could rival that of Saudi Arabia's. Re-development of Iraq's agricultural sector, which had once been a breadbasket of the region, offered promise; Iraq's overall economic development had the potential to be "profound". The United States was sensitive, the VP said, to accusations that it had come to Iraq for her oil. Acknowledging that some still accused Iraq of being "agents of the U.S.", Talabani replied that the presence of U.S. companies nonetheless sent a positive signal.

BLACKWATER APPEAL

¶11. (C) The VP concluded by saying the United States realized the importance of remaining sensitive to perceptions of its actions. An example was the recent decision in the case against Blackwater contractors involved in the September 2007 shooting incident. The VP previewed for Talabani his announcement at the press conference directly after the meeting that the USG would appeal the decision. "This decision was not an acquittal," he said. The United States was "painfully aware" that its actions impact public opinion, and that the perception was that justice had not been served by the Blackwater decision. Stressing his appreciation for Talabani's "unerring" advice, the VP said he viewed him as the glue that had helped hold Iraq together during a difficult period of transition.

¶12. (U) This message has been cleared by the Office of the Vice President and the NSC.

HILL